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Ag Legacy
Helping agriculture nurture its legacy. . .
Agriculture & Horticulture
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How Can Negotiation Strengthen Your Ag Legacy?

Jim thought the conversation should have been simple. His daughter, Katie, had been working on the ranch for years and wanted more responsibility. Jim agreed she was ready, but he wasn't ready to give up control of the cattle decisions. Katie saw that as a lack of trust. Her brother, Matt, who worked off the ranch, worried that whatever they decided might affect his future share of the operation.

Before long, everyone was defending a position: "I need to keep control." "You need to trust me." "I just want things to be fair."

They all wanted the ranch to succeed. So why couldn't they agree?



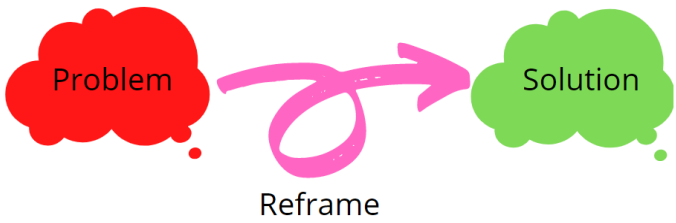
Negotiation Is Already Part of Your Ag Legacy

The word negotiation may bring to mind buying a pickup, selling cattle, settling a lease, or bargaining over a price. But farm and ranch families negotiate much more than dollars.

Who makes which decisions? Who gets paid what? When should the older generation step back? How much responsibility should the next generation receive? Should the operation expand? Who will own the land? What does fair mean when one child works on the ranch and another does not? These are all situations where people may want some of the same things but disagree about how to get there.

Negotiation is a process where people identify issues, explore possible solutions, and work toward an agreement they can accept. It does not have to mean fighting, giving in, or finding a winner and a loser.

Conflict says, "We disagree." Negotiation asks, "How can we work through the disagreement?" That question can be especially important when family relationships and the future of a farm or ranch are both at stake.



Look Behind the Position

One of the most useful negotiation skills is learning the difference between a position and an interest. A position is what someone says they want. An interest is the reason it matters to them.

Suppose Jim says, "I am going to keep making the cattle decisions." That is his position. But why? Maybe Jim worries that one poor decision could cost the



ranch thousands of dollars. Maybe cattle management has been his responsibility for 40 years, and giving it up feels like giving up part of who he is. Maybe he wants proof Katie is ready before turning over more responsibility.

Katie's position may be, "I should be making those decisions now." But her interests may include gaining experience, being respected as a manager, having the freedom to try new ideas, and knowing whether she really has a future in the operation.

Matt may say, "I want my fair share." But what does that mean to him? He may want financial fairness. He may also want to know that living away from the ranch has not removed him from the family or from important conversations about its future.

Now they have much more to discuss than their original positions. Negotiation in Agriculture materials suggest identifying the issues, understanding the interests behind those issues, and then developing possible solutions. Once we understand why something matters, there may be more than one way to meet the need.

Prepare Before the Conversation

Important negotiations deserve preparation. Before sitting down with other family members, consider four questions:

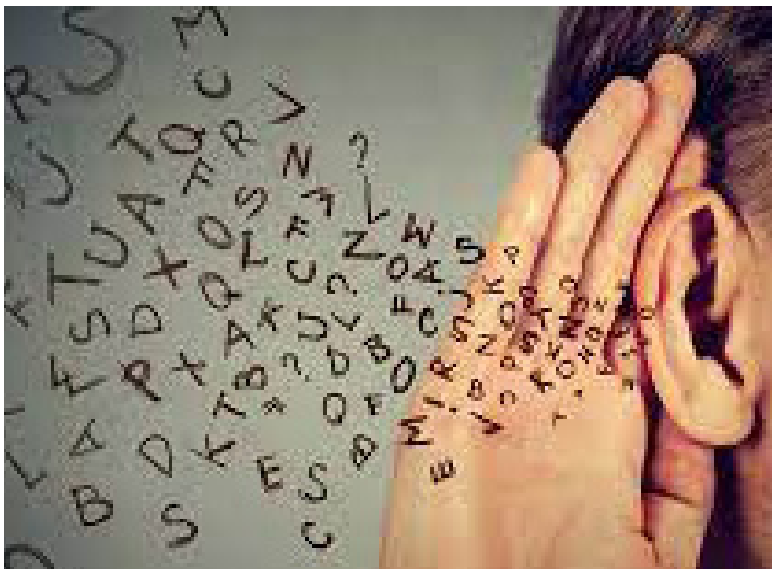
1. What really needs to be decided?
2. What matters to me, and why?
3. What might matter to the other people involved?
4. What will I do if we cannot reach an agreement?

That last question is important. Negotiators sometimes call the best option available if an agreement cannot be reached the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement or BATNA. The term may sound complicated, but the idea is simple: What happens if we do not make a deal?

What happens if Jim does not turn over management this year? What happens if Katie decides she cannot continue working without greater responsibility? What happens if Matt and Katie cannot agree about future ownership? What happens if the business cannot support another family?

Knowing the alternatives can make the discussion more realistic. It can also help people recognize when reaching an agreement is important and when accepting a poor agreement might create bigger problems later.

Preparation can also break a large argument into smaller decisions. Instead of asking, "When are you going to turn this ranch over to me?" a family might separately discuss management authority, workload, compensation, retirement income, ownership, and a timetable for transferring responsibility. That gives the family several problems they can work on rather than one large argument they may never solve.



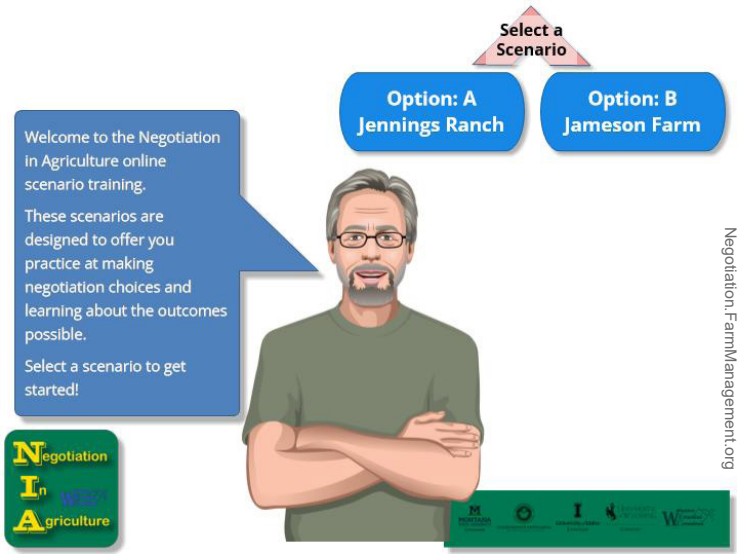
Listen Before You Answer

Preparation helps, but negotiation still requires good communication. AGLEGACY materials have long stressed the importance of questioning, listening, explaining, and reflecting. Active listening means trying to understand both what another person is saying and what may be behind the words. The printed Communicating with the Next Generation bulletin identifies these skills as foundations of good communication.

That can be difficult when the subject is personal. Family members may enter a conversation already expecting what another person will say. We may hear criticism where none was intended, assume we know another person's motives, or begin preparing our answer before the other person finishes talking.

Instead, ask another question. “What worries you most about turning over those decisions?” “What would make you comfortable with this plan?” “When you say you want things to be fair, what would fair look like to you?” Then listen to the answer.

Earlier AGLEGACY work on difficult conversations encourages people to learn the other person's story, explain their own views and feelings, and then work together to explore possible solutions. The goal is not to prove who is right. It is to gain enough understanding to work on the problem together.



Acknowledging another person's concern does not mean agreeing with it. It means you are trying to understand before asking to be understood.

Practice Before It Really Matters

Reading about negotiation can help. Practicing it can help even more. The Negotiation in Agriculture program provides free materials designed for agricultural situations. These include guides, self-paced learning modules, preparation tools, and an online practice simulation.

The simulation lets you make negotiation decisions without putting a real agreement, business relationship, or family relationship at risk. It presents realistic agricultural situations and lets you see how different choices affect the negotiation.

For an Ag Legacy family, the Jennings Ranch Pasture Lease is a good place to begin. The scenario involves a multigenerational ranch family working through a pasture lease negotiation. Family members bring different priorities and ideas to the discussion, while the landowner has concerns of his own.

You make the decisions. What information should you consider? What questions should you ask? When should you push for what you want? Where might there be room for a trade-off? What happens if no agreement is reached? The simulation provides feedback as you work through those decisions.

Visit: **negotiation.farmmanagement.org/training**

Better yet, have two or more family members try the simulation separately. Then compare the choices each person made. You may find that people who agree about the goal still choose very different ways to reach it. That discovery alone can lead to a useful family conversation. If you want to learn more afterward, additional guides and learning modules are available at Negotiation.FarmManagement.org.

A Better Agreement and a Better Relationship

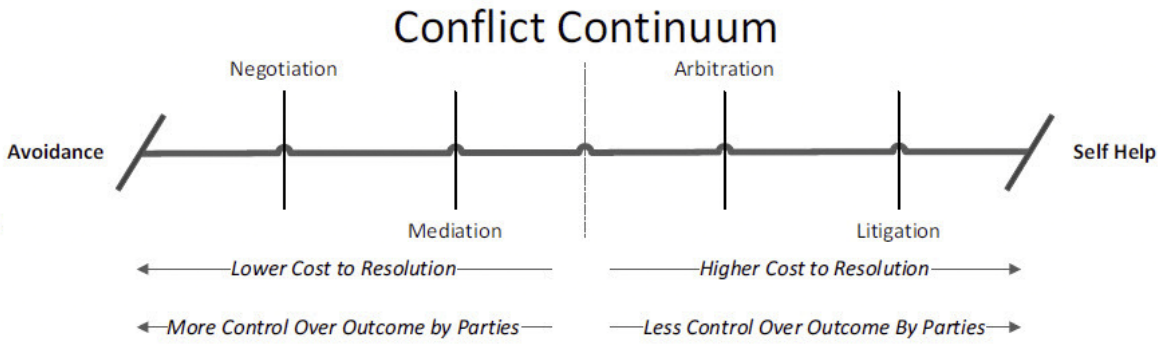
Returning to Jim, Katie, and Matt, success does not mean everyone gets everything they first demanded. Jim might keep responsibility for some cattle decisions while Katie takes responsibility for others. They might agree on a six-month trial, identify decisions Katie can make independently, and schedule regular meetings to review what is working.

Matt might not have a role in daily cattle management, but the family could agree that he will be included in discussions involving long-term ownership and other decisions that affect his place in the family. The exact solution matters less than the process used to reach it.

The May 2026 AG LEGACY Newsletter made a similar point. An Ag Legacy is not simply the land, livestock, equipment, or business being passed down. It also includes how family members are treated while that

transition takes place. A family can complete the legal transfer and still damage the legacy if relationships are broken in the process.

Negotiation gives families another tool for protecting both the agricultural business and the people connected to it.



Your Next Step

Before your next multigenerational farm or ranch meeting, try the Jennings Ranch Pasture Lease simulation at **negotiation.farmmanagement.org/training**. Ask another family member to try it too.

Then compare your decisions. Where did you agree? Where did you take different approaches? What interests were you trying to protect? You do not have to wait until your own farm, ranch, money, or relationships are on the line to practice negotiating. Practice the conversation before the conversation really matters.

Ag Legacy materials and online learning modules are developed to assist farm and ranch families in developing a complete legacy. For more on upcoming modules, past newsletters, and information about Ag Legacy, see AgLegacy.org.

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